

# Developing consistency by consensus: Avoiding fiat in language revitalization

*Dzéiwsh*<sup>1</sup> James A. Crippen<sup>2</sup>    *X'unei*<sup>3</sup> Lance Twitchell<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Kaakáak'w Hít Deisheetaan, S'iknax.ádi yádi, Shtax'héen K'wáan*

<sup>2</sup>Department of Linguistics, University of British Columbia

<sup>3</sup>*Yéil Hít Lukaax.ádi, Dakl'aweidí yádi, Jilkoot K'wáan*

<sup>4</sup>Alaska Native Languages, University of Alaska Southeast

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# Topics

## Introduction

What is 'fiat' in language revitalization?

Tlingit background

## Orthography problems

Phoneme inventory

Existing orthographies

Emergent orthography

## Neologisms and the lexicon

Creating and borrowing

Language play and change

## Discussion

# What is ‘fiat’ in revitalization?

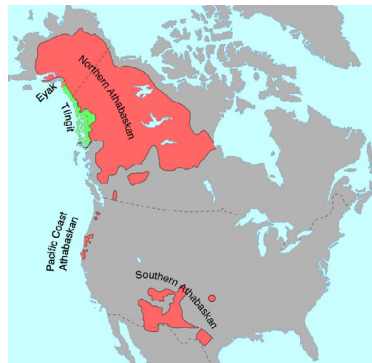
- FIAT is the declaration of an obligatory linguistic standard in a speech community
  - OED: (< Latin *fīat* ‘let it be done’) an authoritative pronouncement, decree, command, order.
- obligatory means that everyone must follow the standard
- the prototypical example is an orthography
  - everything in the language must be written according to the standard
- another example is establishing modern terminology
  - “how do you say telephone?” “*a tóode yoo x’atangi át*, never *tenefon!*”

## Why should we avoid fiat?

- standards are supposed to improve communication by establishing consistency in the speech community
  - but they don't always work, so what do we do when they don't?
- most linguistic practices develop naturally by emergent consensus
  - but critically endangered languages usually don't have enough daily use for consensus to emerge quickly, and not enough time to wait
  - so standardization is supposed to replace the natural social processes
- but revitalization ideally renews the natural state of a language
  - rigid adherence to standards can kill emergent consensus
  - standards should be violable if natural development is occurring
- we will describe a few examples of emergent consensus in Tlingit
- we will also describe how to avoid fiat so that consensus can flower

# Tlingit language background

- Tlingit /'kɫɪŋ.kɪt/ “cling-kit”,  
*Lingít* /ʔɪn.kít/ ‘person, Tlingit’
- member of Na-Dene family,  
relative of Dene (Athabaskan)  
family & Eyak language
- spoken in Alaska, British  
Columbia, and Yukon
- critically endangered: ~200  
speakers, nearly all > 60 y.o.
  - ethnic pop. up to 25,000
- ample documentation, but limited description
  - most description is unpublished manuscripts, hard to find
- active revitalization, but hampered by lack of description
  - maybe 15 conversationally fluent adult learners, 1–2 children < 2 y.o.



# Orthography problems

- Tlingit has a very large phoneme inventory, largest in North America
- there are up to 47 consonants
  - independent aspiration and rounding contrasts
  - full set of ejectives including stops, affricates, and fricatives
  - 12–14 uvulars and glottals
- only four basic vowels, but independent length and tone contrasts
  - so 16 possible vowels
- as a consequence, Tlingit is hard to make orthographies for

# Consonant inventory

	<i>bilabial</i>	<i>alveolar</i>	<i>postalv.</i>	<i>lateral</i>	<i>palatal</i>	<i>velar</i>	<i>lab.-vel.</i>	<i>uvular</i>	<i>lab.-uvu.</i>	<i>glottal</i>	<i>lab.-glot.</i>
<i>unaspirated stop</i>		t				k	k <sup>w</sup>	q	q <sup>w</sup>		
<i>aspirated stop</i>		t <sup>h</sup>				k <sup>h</sup>	k <sup>hw</sup>	q <sup>h</sup>	q <sup>hw</sup>		
<i>ejective stop</i>		t'				k'	k' <sup>w</sup>	q'	q' <sup>w</sup>	ʔ	(ʔ <sup>w</sup> )
<i>unasp. affricate</i>		ts	tʃ	tɬ							
<i>asp. affricate</i>		ts <sup>h</sup>	tʃ <sup>h</sup>	tɬ <sup>h</sup>							
<i>ejev. affricate</i>		ts'	tʃ'	tɬ'							
<i>fricative</i>		s	ʃ	ɬ		x	x <sup>w</sup>	χ	χ <sup>w</sup>	h	(h <sup>w</sup> )
<i>ejev. fricative</i>		s'		ɬ'		x'	x' <sup>w</sup>	χ'	χ' <sup>w</sup>		
<i>approximant</i>				(l) <sub>I</sub>	j	(uɟ) <sub>TA</sub>	w				
<i>nasal</i>	(m) <sub>IA</sub>	n									

A = Archaic Northern, I = Inland Northern, T = Tongass dialect.

Parenthesized consonants without subscripts are idiolectal.

# Vowel inventory (Northern dialect)

	<i>low tone</i>						<i>high tone</i>					
	<i>short</i>			<i>long</i>			<i>short</i>			<i>long</i>		
	<i>fnt.</i>	<i>ctr.</i>	<i>bck.</i>	<i>fnt.</i>	<i>ctr.</i>	<i>bck.</i>	<i>fnt.</i>	<i>ctr.</i>	<i>bck.</i>	<i>fnt.</i>	<i>ctr.</i>	<i>bck.</i>
<i>high</i>	ì		ù	ì:		ù:	í		ú	í:		ú:
<i>mid</i>	è			è:			é			é:		
<i>low</i>		à			à:			á			á:	



- Tlingit has had quite a few orthographies over the years
  - Cyrillic orthography (e.g. 1846)
    - á кустий /hà: q<sup>h</sup>ùstì:jí/ our culture.POSS
  - Kelly and Willard orthography (1905)
    - hä ƛoostēyē'
  - Shotridge's orthography (e.g. 1915)
    - hà q'ùst'iyí
  - first Naish & Story orthography (e.g. 1963), "NS1"
    - hah ƛostèeyee
  - second Naish & Story orthography (e.g. 1973), "NS2"
    - haa ƛustèeyee
  - revised popular orthography (e.g. 1976) "RP"
    - haa ƛusteeyí
  - Yukon Native Language Centre orthography (e.g. 1993) "Y"
    - hà khustìyí
- publications in NS2, RP, and Y are still in active use

# Orthographic details

- most current orthographies derive from NS<sub>1</sub> (NS<sub>2</sub>, RP)
  - apostrophe for ejectives: *ch', x', tl' = /tʃ', x', tʃ'/*
  - unaspirated is 'voiced' vs. aspirated 'voiceless': *ts, dz = /ts<sup>h</sup>, ts/*
  - underscores represent uvular sounds: *g, k, k', x'w = /q, q<sup>h</sup>, q', χ'w/*
  - length is represented with Englishy digraphs: *ei, ee, oo = /è:, ì:, ù:/*
  - high tone is an acute on the first grapheme in a vowel: *áa, á = /á:, á/*
- but the YNLC orthography replaces uvulars, tone, and length
  - velar + *h* for uvulars: *gh, kh, xh'w = /q, q<sup>h</sup>, χ'w/*
  - tone and length are combined into a single diacritic
    - short and low is plain: *i, e, a, u = /ì, è, à, ù/*
    - long and low with grave: *ì, è, à, ù = /î:, è:, à:, ù:/*
    - short and high with acute: *í, é, á, ú = /í, é, á, ú/*
    - long and high with circumflex: *î, ê, â, û = /î:, é:, á:, ú:/*

# Emergent orthography

- Tlingits wanted to write Tlingit in email and on the web in the 1990s
- underlines were easy on typewriters, but they are hard on computers
- in fact, diacritics in general are not easy in Anglophone countries
- people started combining the existing orthographies independently
- what emerged was the Email orthography
  - uvulars with C + *h* from YNLC: *gh, kh, xh'w* = /q, q<sup>h</sup>, χ<sup>w</sup>/
  - vowel tone and length from RP: *ée, ú, aa* = /í:, ú:, à:/
  - without diacritics (e.g. txt msgs), postvocalic apostrophe: *e'e ~ ee'* /í:/
- the inventors are unknown so nobody “owns” this orthography
- it is now conventional for Tlingit on Facebook, Twitter, in email, etc.

# Avoiding fiat

- if we demand only official orthographies, people will feel held back
  - any kind of writing is better than nothing at all
  - communication is the goal, the standard is just one path there
- the Email orthography is a natural anonymous development
  - people use it because it's effective for communication
  - it isn't "owned" by one group, so it's free to use and abuse
- we want revitalization to encourage natural language growth
  - if we insist firmly on standards, we may retard natural growth
- we have to be willing to "let go" of the language into the community

# Neologisms

- a NEOLOGISM is a new word invented to fill some perceived gap in the language's lexicon (inventory of words, mental dictionary)
- neologisms can arise from many different processes , e.g.
  - deliberate construction
  - borrowing from other languages
  - language play
  - extension and meaning shift of existing words

# Creating neologisms

- highly endangered languages lack modern terminology
  - computer, cell phone, television, microphone, newspaper, etc.
- people may invent terms individually, but there's no standard
- so a community may set up a council to develop terminology
- but quite often people just ignore the proposed terms
  - the terms may be awkward: *kashóok' tlageiyí* 'electric brain'
  - the terms may be hard to remember: *a tóonáx kadus'íks' át* 'straw'
  - the terms may be "owned" and seem imposed on the community

## Borrowing versus code-switching

- «machine kayéik aawa.áx̣» — “she heard the sound of a machine”
  - the word *machine* is English, stuck into the Tlingit sentence
  - this is code-switching, substituting one language for another
- «yú washéen katágayi wulil'éex'» — “the engine cylinder rod broke”
  - the word *washéen* is Tlingit, meaning ‘engine’ rather than ‘machine’
  - Tlingit mostly doesn't have *m* so it's *w*, and high tone instead of stress
  - this is borrowing, the word is integrated into the language
- code-switched words tend to become borrowed over time
- code-switching isn't inherently bad, it can enrich the language
- communication is more important than “purity” or “faithfulness” when a language is dying
  - borrowed words develop from emergent consensus
  - encouraging natural development means accepting change

# Language play

- «wáa sá aduspelled?» — “how do people spell it?”
  - English *spelled* interpreted as *s-√pelled* ‘CL-√spell’
  - *yéi wutusipelled* ‘we spelled it that way’ — perfectly regular
  - we get a new verb root by reinterpreting the English word
- so maybe «ash wutusikáayp» — “we Skyped him”
- or «a kaanáx wusikíp» — “he skipped along on top of it”
- these may be frowned upon by some, but they use the language’s own logic to communicate in a creative and fun way
- banning this kind of play would stunt the growth of the speech community since such play is a natural development of language



## Extension of existing vocabulary

- «ch'u tle **dziyáagín** gunéi gaxtoo.áat»  
“we’re going to start going **later**”
- the word *dziyáagín* ‘later’ has been extended to English usage
  - «dziyáagín ikkwasatéen» — “I’ll see you later”
- lately it’s gone even further
  - «dziyáagín!» — “later!” (said on departure)
- the English logic is transferred to Tlingit, and Tlingit adapts to fit it
- nobody planned this sort of thing, it emerged naturally from use
- barring its use may please purists, but it represents active participation in the speech community
  - an alternative is to mark it as “slang”, not permitted in formal contexts but acceptable in casual contexts

## Working with mistakes

- when learners make mistakes, it's tempting to instantly correct them
- our elders sometimes correct us, but sometimes not
- feedback in the form of “reflections”, restating the same thing
- we already do this in conversation, so it's natural to do in teaching
  - “he said he was feeling kinda strange”
  - “yeah, he said he was feeling funny”
- the following exchange was on Facebook (people acting like a raven)
  - «ts'ootaat at xha i khudlil'ootl aa déi ... akwé?»  
“morning food yours scavenging that way ... right?”
  - «ts'ootaat atxhaayíghaa ldakát yéide kheeydlil'óotl (gwál)»  
“everywhere you have scavenging for breakfast (maybe)”
  - «ts'ootaat atxhaayíghaa ldakát yéide kheell'óotl»  
“you're scavenging everywhere for breakfast”
- people provide gradually better models for each other

# A language owned by everyone

- standardization can be beneficial for establishing consistency
  - but enforcement of standards should be flexible to permit growth
- languages should be “owned by everyone” in the community:  
*ldakát uháan haa at.óowux sitee, yá haa yoo x’atángi*
- emergent consensus is better than making standards by fiat
  - fiat is unnatural, emergent consensus is natural
  - revitalization should progress from artificial to natural
  - revitalization leaders need to be willing to “let go” of the language

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